

Brock Faculty Concerns with Post-Pandemic Research

November 10, 2021

Faculty Research Council

The need for further investments in funding, people and services in light of the current pandemic for research at Brock University was highlighted by the Maclean's rankings for 2022 that placed Brock University 15th or dead last for Canadian comprehensive universities in total research dollars. This ranking further confirms the need for internal investments in funds, equipment, and people to boost research at Brock.

The Faculty Research Council conducted a survey of faculty and librarians in July 2021 following 15 months of COVID-related research disruptions to investigate Brock University research practices, culture and support. Participants were asked a series of questions on steps needed to get their research programs back on track, impediments to research productivity, and issues where administration could help facilitate research going forward.

Survey responses from 91 participants representing all Brock faculties collected a wealth of data, opinions and comments. A dataset of over 330 comments was analyzed by an independent researcher skilled with qualitative analysis. Resultant survey themes were identified analyzing patterns of coded texts by frequency, interrelationships, and language in addition to recognising participants' values, feelings, attitudes, and beliefs.

The survey found a significant number of faculty and librarians emerging out of the COVID pandemic angry, frustrated, tired, and burnt out. The combination of high teaching loads, not enough time to do research, insufficient number of doctoral programs, poor quality of students, and administrative hindrances impact the ability of faculty, graduate students and research teams to perform quality research.

Survey findings identified five top emergent themes. These themes documented faculty and librarians' need for: 1) Further administrative involvement and support from ORS, REB, Dean's Offices, colleagues and collaborators, 2) Reduced teaching and administrative loads to spend more time researching, 3) The need for further support in the form of internal grants and seed money, 4) An increase in research, workspace, resources, equipment and general support, and 5) An increase in research awareness and collaborations.

Emergent themes follow with selective comments documenting the voices and lived experiences of faculty and librarians.

1) Further administrative involvement and support from ORS, REB, Dean's Offices, funding agencies, colleagues and collaborators.

"Have the new President be active, engaging and promote research at Brock... [to] improve Brock's reputation, provincial, national and international profile - get busy!"

"Advocacy on behalf of faculty to funding agencies and other granting/funding bodies to lengthen funding terms and support the success of the people/research they have funded."

"Recognition of the unevenness of the effects of the pandemic, and a serious commitment to efforts to support those who have experienced major interruptions and delays. Ideally this would come through funding (for research assistants/associates in my case).

"Childcare is the biggest challenge I face... and no tangible support was provided by Brock to assist me. My youngest child has been on the waiting list at Rosalind Blauer for over 3 years (before/during) the pandemic without ever getting in In the absence of an adequate number of licensed daycare spots on campus, Brock could provide a childcare fund (e.g., McMaster faculty can receive up to \$2500 per year) ...allow for realistic reimbursements for childcare."

"The unanswered question is how will the research students be funded as they enter their third year of a two-year program, having lost the better part of a year due to the pandemic? The uncertainty creates anxiety for the students, and this adds to their burden."

"LTD RESPECT FOR RESEARCH: unfunded research devalued; only 'sexy' or topical research matters."

"My graduate students may need extra time to graduate And they need funding for this extension period!"

"...given the state of Brock's library which is really a poor undergraduate library; currently articles arrive fairly quickly, but book chapters or books do not and I feel patrons have been strongly discouraged from even placing requests Over the course of the pandemic, there has been less or less easy access for library resources which is disappointing. The admin also needs to actually invest in library resources: books (print and electronic), journals, and human resources. Every 6 months there is a new library liaison for my dept - no continuity."

"LACK OF SUPPORT FOR GRANT APPS: after 3 attempts at a Standard Research Grant (SSHRC), I gave up. I got no support from ORS and outreach efforts since have been feeble."

"We need grant writers."

2) Reduced teaching and administrative loads to spend more time researching.

"...replace retiring faculty with tenure track positions."

"The teaching load is too high for those of us who are truly research intensive and apply for large grants. I have not been able to secure teaching release when applying for a SSHRC partnership grant and have a lingering thought that our lack of success may have been due to the lack of proper time."

"Provide more support. This would be in terms of reduced teaching load and/or recognizing MSc and PhD training as teaching. Reduced student fees for MSc and PhD students so that maintaining a research group of 6-10 graduate students is possible. Assist in acquire new instrumentation."

"Teaching releases for productive researchers."

"The biggest obstacle for me is time. With out teaching loads and the added work COVID has created (both in teaching and in administration), my time is EXTREMELY limited. Less teaching and admin would go a long way to rebuilding my program of research."

"I would like to see an acknowledgement and action about how much more time is required to manage the teaching responsibilities, especially when online, including all the extra administrative tasks and lack of assessment security."

3) Further support in the form of internal grants and seed money.

"[make available] ...small grants to help us get our research going again - \$3000-\$5000."

"Finding core long term funding for research."

"Provide short term COVID funding."

"Faculty research awards that provide long term (e.g. 5 yrs) teaching release."

"...some US universities have offered faculty a course release to acknowledge the intense time requirements of online emergency teaching that brought research productivity to a near stand-still for the past year. It would be good to see that here - this is the most important - we have all lost over a year of research time and everyone is utterly exhausted."

"...given that the difficult situation is likely to last for a while, at least, funding to update basic computer equipment and peripherals to enable more and better quality online work would also be helpful."

"Adequate funding for graduate students remains a serious impediment. It is important that the funding for grad students who have experienced delays continues while they catch up."

"Stipends in the library are non-existent, grants are not available, and annual PER allocations are so small it is difficult to conduct research."

4) ...an increase in research, workspace, resources, equipment and general support.

"Provide more support for administrative duties that have become an insurmountable burden. This burden is felt especially heavy in department that have a small faculty footprint."

"We have almost no technical support."

"....Brock's [Library] resources are so poor. Pre-pandemic, ILL was usually very good with quick turnaround and rarely a request denied The admin doesn't seem to recognize that a library is an integral part of a university for research but also for teaching, grad studies. Money needs to be spent on books (print + electronic), journals, ensuring less turnover with staff, hiring librarians with experience in advanced research."

"Assistance with making the community feel it is safe to visit campus (when it is safe of course) to encourage participants to come to campus."

5) ...an increase in advocacy for research awareness and collaborations.

“Promote interdepartmental collaborations.”

“Finding funds for sustainable and long term funding for my lab, graduate students, and postdoc would help me be set up for success as I attempt to open my lab for different projects and people. Funding is never enough, finding experienced technicians and graduate students that are readily available and able to conduct research consumes my time and energy There just isn't enough support from the faculty in crucial areas to do essential and creative research.”

“Low FT faculty ratio in my department leading to increased service obligations; percussive warnings from our Dean about the need to recruit students or else; seemingly endless requests from recruitment and liaison for publicity materials and promotional materials about the department for recruitment purposes.”

“....I feel quite isolated from other researchers in the Humanities. My department ...is small and most people ...aren't as research focused. When I applied for the Brock Explore, I didn't even know anyone who had applied for this opportunity I would be interested in joining a working group of early-career researchers applying to a SSHRC Insight Development grant in 2022. I'd also be interested in opportunities to share research informally with other people in the Humanities.”

“For newly hired tenure-track researchers, it would be invaluable to hear from the administration about how the pandemic disruptions will influence applications for tenure. Will the evaluation process officially take these disruptions into account? Will these considerations be extended to all research disciplines?”

The Faculty Research Council is a group of committed Brock University faculty and librarians that promote the value and importance of research.